



The President's Daily Brief

August 16, 1976

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Top Secret

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FOR THE PRESIDENT ONLY

August 16, 1976

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LEBANON: *Christian forces announced yesterday that the battle to retake Palestinian positions in the mountains east of Beirut had begun. Both Christian and Palestinian sources report that heavy fighting has been under way in or near three towns in the mountains since Friday night.*

A Christian offensive so soon after the fall of Tall Zatar could encourage reprisals against Christian communities even by less radical Palestinians disinclined to retaliate for the Tall Zatar defeat.

Both Christian and Palestinian officials have indicated that the Palestinians agreed late last week to evacuate positions in the mountains east of the capital and were negotiating the terms of a withdrawal with Phalanges Party officials.

The Christians seem undeterred by the prospect of reprisals. In a broadcast that heralded the offensive in the mountains, the Christian radio declared on Saturday that the last Palestinian stronghold there could be easily overrun and suggested that a Christian move northward to Tripoli could allow the Christians to "draw new geographical lines for Lebanon."

Christians began an infantry and artillery attack Saturday night on two towns east of Tripoli, apparently in a renewed attempt to tighten the siege of Palestinian and leftist positions in the port city.

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Palestinian and leftist spokesmen are interpreting the latest Christian moves as aimed at partitioning Lebanon. Phalanges Party leader Pierre Jumayyil reinforced their suspicions with a statement Friday advocating a decentralized system of separately administered Christian and Muslim areas.

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Jumayyil proposed talks on his federation scheme between Christian and Muslim leaders, apparently directing his appeal to traditional Muslim leaders in an effort to exclude leftist leader Kamal Jumblatt. Jumblatt asserted on Saturday that the loss of Tall Zatar had closed all doors to negotiations, and he called for a war of attrition against the Christians and Syrians.

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, apparently fearing renewed bloodshed as a result of reprisals for the Tall Zatar defeat, have called for an Arab summit to discuss the Lebanon situation. In carefully worded statements that avoided placing blame or taking sides, both urged that some sort of concord among the Arabs is essential lest the "deep hatred and desire for revenge" now prevalent grow more intense.

Christian sources say that the 2,100 Iraqi militiamen who they allege arrived in Lebanon on Thursday have now moved north to consolidate control of the highway to Beirut.

The Iraqis are said to be building fortifications along a stretch of the road about half way to Beirut.

We are still unable to confirm the size of the Iraqi contingent,

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Syria's Interior Ministry announced on Friday new restrictions on travel between Lebanon and Syria, apparently as a precaution against the infiltration of Palestinian and Iraqi saboteurs. Damascus has experienced a series of bombings in recent weeks, and the Syrians probably fear further reprisals as a result of the fall of Tall Zatar.

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EGYPT-SYRIA: *An exchange of denunciations that began over the weekend constitutes, particularly in Egypt's case, a new declaration of political warfare.*

In an official statement issued Friday night, Egypt denounced Syria and the Lebanese Christians as traitors who have disgraced themselves by cooperating with Israel to crush the Palestinians. The statement predicted that the Syrian leadership will fall along with the Tall Zatar refugee camp in Beirut. It warned "all these traitors who call themselves Arabs that the battle to purge them from honorable Arab ranks has begun."

Although Egypt's statement seemed to give official sanction to recent hints in the Cairo press that the Syrian regime should be toppled, there is little that the Egyptians can do directly to bring the Asad government down. They could, however, step up their already considerable effort to rearm Palestinian and leftist forces in Lebanon.

Syria responded on Saturday with an equally scornful but less threatening official statement that rehashed old Syrian charges of Egyptian cooperation with Israel and for the first time publicly accused Egypt of supplying arms to Palestinian forces in Lebanon. Charging that Cairo has consistently refused to arm the Palestinians for operations against Israel, the statement derided the Egyptians and President Sadat for arming them now and inciting them "to die in the wrong place." The Syrian statement appealed for support from the Egyptian people but stopped short of directly threatening Sadat.

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Damascus challenged Egypt either to open its borders for fedayeen action against Israel or to send troops to southern Lebanon to stand with Syrian troops against possible Israeli intervention there.

The Syrians undoubtedly know that Egypt is unlikely to risk a conflict with Israel by taking either action; Syria has itself carefully avoided such provocations. The challenge clearly is designed to embarrass the Egyptians by pointing up the insincerity of Egypt's current support for the Palestinians, and to turn Egypt's charges of Syrian-Israeli collusion around by accusing the Egyptians of the same perfidy.

The pledge in Cairo's statement that Egypt would stand "with all its capabilities" by the side of the Palestinians could indicate an intention at least to reconsider the possibility of sending Egyptian troops to fight with the Palestinians and leftists. This possibility reportedly was considered and rejected last month. The Egyptians are already assisting in the transport of Iraqi militia-men to Lebanon.

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EGYPT-LIBYA: *Egyptian officials are assuming that Libya was behind the bombing of a passenger train in Alexandria on Saturday, although they have no firm evidence and have apprehended no suspects.*

The bombing--probably the worst terrorist incident in Egypt in years--killed eight and injured 50.

Authorities have announced that the explosives used were similar to those used in previous incidents known to have been Libyan-inspired. The Egyptians are certain to use the bombing as further evidence for their contention that Libyan President Qadhafi poses a threat to Egypt and the Arab world, whether or not they obtain good evidence of a Libyan connection.

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One Cairo newspaper has already asserted that the incident provides further proof that "indulgence" is no longer possible with Qadhafi, and President Sadat warned repeatedly in an interview published just before the bombing that Qadhafi "will not escape from my hands this time." 50X1

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The Egyptians' frequent warnings to Libya over the past few weeks and the publicity given in recent days to Egypt's "defensive" military concentrations on the Libyan border are probably also designed in part to reassure the Egyptian people that the government can provide adequate security against sabotage. The US embassy in Cairo reports that many Egyptians are apprehensive about frequenting public places. 50X1

Libya's official news agency, referring to what it called Sadat's recurrent attacks of "mental illness," yesterday urged all Arab states to be wary of dealing with Sadat because his behavior on all issues has been irresponsible and erratic. Although the Libyans are unlikely to gain much sympathy for their own position from other Arab states, their efforts to undermine Sadat by highlighting his erratic behavior may strike a responsive chord among some Arab leaders. 50X1

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NOTES

The Angolan government has Holden Roberto's National Front on the defensive, although the guerrillas have made several raids on government posts and facilities this month.

The National Front is handicapped by reduced support from Zaire's President Mobutu, who has stated publicly that he is no longer assisting the Front and that it no longer has troops in Zaire. For the past three months Mobutu and other senior Zairian officials reportedly have refused to meet with Holden Roberto. 50X1

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Contrary to Mobutu's claim, [redacted]

[redacted] about 1,500 armed guerrillas remain in Zaire [redacted]

Cuban specialists are assisting the government's counterinsurgency forces, [redacted]

[redacted] The effectiveness of government forces has not improved, however, and the Cubans reportedly are aware that a major Cuban troop reduction could seriously weaken the government. 50X1

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Two Soviet destroyers will arrive in Cuba late today or early tomorrow, the first visit by Soviet warships in over a year.

Such visits normally occur about twice a year. Moscow may earlier have postponed sending ships to Cuba in order to avoid attracting additional US and international attention to Soviet and Cuban involvement in Angola.

The two destroyers en route to Cuba served as escort ships for the aircraft carrier Kiev on its voyage through the Mediterranean to the Northern Fleet area, parting company with the Kiev west of Ireland.

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